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Review

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Dreaming of What Might Be

Not so long ago, republicanism – as ideology, as discourse, as political and social practice, as conceptual paradigm – was a staple of American history. “By 1990,” according to Princeton’s Daniel Rodgers, republicanism had expanded far beyond the climes of revolutionary-era debate where Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood, Joyce Appleby and J.G.A. Pocock, had first uncovered its spoor. It had become a dominant concept in nineteenth century history and was drumming on the door of the twentieth. It “was everywhere” in American historiography, “and organizing everything.”¹ This was particularly true in labor history, where, for fifteen years beginning in the early 1980s, the idea that something called “labor republicanism” had emerged during the course of the nineteenth century as a mature expression of distinctively American working-class values and anticapitalist ideology became the subject of furious and extended argument.² Then, rather abruptly, republicanism’s balloon burst; some would say, because it had been discovered by the legal academy.³ The crowd moved on. Speaking comparatively, republicanism in general, labor republicanism in particular, attracts little attention from today’s historians.

To pick up Alex Gourevitch’s *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* is thus in some respects to enter a warp in time. The book is a crowd of well-known (to the *cognoscenti*) Victorian faces – Orestes Brownson, Langton Byllesby, George Henry Evans, William Heighton, George McNeill, Terence Powderly, Thomas Skidmore, Ira Steward, William H. Sylvis, and more; it is full of the organizations they nurtured – the workingmen’s parties, newspapers, and city central unions of the 1820s and 1830s, the National Reform Association of the

1840s and 1850s, the National Labor Union (1866-74), The Iron Molders International Union (established 1859), and above all, of course, the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor (established 1869); and it is a roster of the historians who, thirty years ago, debated labor republicanism's meaning.⁴ It is, of course, nice to meet all these old friends again, to be reminded of good works once done. But, one must ask, to what end? This is a nasty question to ask of a junior scholar's first book. Still, this is a book full of the familiar. What does Gourevitch bring to this crowded table, apart from an opportunity to reminisce? I will offer two responses.

First, the question is unfair. Gourevitch is not a historian engaged in a hopeful rake-over of very cold ashes. He is a political scientist participating in a debate of decidedly current moment within his own corner of that discipline, political theory. Generally sympathetic to present-day scholars and public intellectuals who embrace a "neo-republican" critique of liberal political theory, Gourevitch nevertheless finds neo-republicanism cramped and incomplete. Like its exponents, he has turned to "the stream of history," but not for the purpose of historical inquiry.⁵ Rather he seeks to mobilize information and examples ignored by neo-republicans that, he believes, will not only complete their critique of liberalism but also in the process alter it radically.

Neo-republicans criticize liberalism for its attempt to naturalize our conception of liberty as freedom from the actuality of interference in the choices we make – an identifiable intrusion or trespass that impedes or hinders an agent's exercise of free will.⁶ The canonical modern statement is Isaiah Berlin's, from 1958: "The essence of the notion of liberty, in both the 'positive' and the 'negative' senses, is the holding off of something or someone – of others who trespass on my field or assert their authority over me ... intruders and despots of one kind or another."⁷ Neo-republicans argue for a broader conception of liberty as freedom from domination: that is, not simply freedom from actual interference, real or threatened, but also from dominion, the condition of "living in dependence on the goodwill of [others]," with all the constraints on autonomy, on self-action and self-realization, that dependence implies.⁸ Neo-republicans trace the pedigree of their theory of liberty to the "Democratical Gentlemen" who spoke out against Stuart tyranny in seventeenth century England and who warred against it in the English Civil War, and to the Romans – Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus – by whom they were inspired.⁹ Neo-republicans regret the extinguishment of this broad conception of liberty from English political discourse that began with Hobbes, continued during the court versus country

battles of the eighteenth century, and climaxed in the nineteenth century's decisive turn to utilitarianism and empiricism. They argue that English political discourse should be recognized to contain not one but two theories of liberty, "rival and incommensurable," even though "in recent times we have generally contrived to ignore one of them."¹⁰

For Gourevitch, the extinguishment of republican liberty from English political discourse is in part a story of how it turned up in America, where, as American historians who cut their teeth on Bailyn and Wood and Pocock will know, it played a major role in the epoch of the Revolution and the founding of the republic. The thread of connection was not cut, it migrated. But far more important than *this* history for Gourevitch is what came after, for it is there – in the nineteenth century – that history can be found to sustain not simply a neo-republican critique of liberalism but a radical critique of neo-republicanism. For all its critical attention to domination, neo-republicanism has a cramped understanding of its expressions, notably in market relations.¹¹ In particular neo-republicans have no conception of structural domination – the domination associated with asymmetries of power in the organization of economic activity. It was precisely that understanding of domination that American labor republicans developed over the course of the nineteenth century, an understanding that Gourevitch now argues we should rescue for our own times "as a contribution to our own ideas" (189).

Labor republicans' appreciation of structural domination took time and effort to crystallize. An early impediment was American republicanism's fatal association with the actuality of slavery – the paradox of white civic freedom and relative equality founded on African slavery sheeted home by Edmund Morgan.¹² Early labor republicans addressed the philosophical problem of a republic of slavery by counterposing an antebellum republic of free labor, idealizing labor as a free-willed disposition of one's self in which all could engage. "The ideal was meant to resolve the tension between freedom and equality in favor of a universalizable conception of economic independence" (16). Yet the solution was but a temporary compromise, for the question quickly arose, of course, whether a meaningful "independence" could survive "free" labor's growing association with wage work and all the restraints on self-action that the wage-paying employer demanded of the recipient employee. Here lay a crucial choice: laissez-faire republicans (Garrisonian abolitionists, for example) argued that by definition no one freely contracting to work for a wage could be considered a wage *slave*. "The wage-laborer controlled his labor the way any

property-owner controlled his property" (17). Labor republicans answered that, contract notwithstanding, wage labor was necessarily a slavish dependence – subordination to the direction of another. At first it was a dependence to be avoided, in nostalgic “agrarian” invocations of artisanal sufficiency, of propertied free-will. But increasingly, particularly after the Civil War, wage labor was recognized as a structural dependence to be answered and transcended by collective action – self-organization and cooperation. “Only the cooperative commonwealth, a condition in which all workers exercised joint ownership and control over industrial enterprises, could offer everyone a condition of free labor” (17). This, and a newly collectivist conception of civic identity self-taught through solidaristic practices and institutions to which the ideal of the cooperative commonwealth was allied, was labor republicanism’s answer to structural domination. Here is the radical supplement to neo-republicanism that Gourevitch believes American history can teach to present-day political theory.

The second answer to my “nasty question” does not (unlike the first) turn on the excuse that Gourevitch is not a historian. Instead it takes his resort to history at his word as a conscious attempt to render history a lively and transformative influence in a current debate. Musing on Ira Steward’s observation, in 1873, that “the laborer instinctively feels that something of slavery still remains, or that something of freedom is yet come,”¹³ Gourevitch observes “once we reconstruct the ideas of the labor republicans, we might come to see not just the force of their words in their own time, but that something of freedom is yet to come for us as well” (17). There is at first sight a certain wistful quality to that hope.¹⁴ *These* ideas? A means to freedom for *us*? *Now*? How can steam-age musings about cooperative commonwealths possibly have purchase on the teeming globalized corporate world of 2015? Yet in developing its account of liberalism and neo-republicanism, and of labor republicanism, Gourevitch’s book stands as an illustration precisely of how all political consciousness is constructed from fragile, centuries-long threads of ideas. In these threads ideas come and go and come again. They are only ever rendered “out of date,” doomed to entrapment in a particular past from which the present has departed, in teleological and developmental accounts of human affairs and intellects.

One might think this state of affairs allows the political theorist-as-historian (or the historian-as-political theorist) a certain complacency: the ideas are always there, they are not going anywhere, they can be retrieved as and when appropriate. “The truth will not run away from us” Gottfried Keller famously observed.¹⁵ But this is to think as an academic might, undertaking academic

research and publishing an academic's book. In real life the obverse is the case. "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."¹⁶ Gourevitch may appear wistful. By dint of circumstance and career, he may even appear to be academic. But there is an urgency to the constellation of present and past that he seeks to create.

Sixty years ago Isaiah Berlin attempted politely but firmly to consign one mode of liberty – the positive – to the dustbin of the past, while simultaneously locking the other – the negative – to a parsimonious liberal definition: freedom from actual restraint. The present day's neo-republicans have been attempting to undo Berlin's parsimonious definition, but they have failed to address (or perhaps, rather, they do not care to address) the broader limitations on the usage of liberty he inscribed. In "Two Concepts of Liberty" Berlin was actually engaged in a double move, the effect of which was not only to exalt a liberal version of negative liberty but to undermine those who would mobilize political ideas of liberty in the service of self-realization, who would countermand substantive domination with collective action. Gourevitch's attempt to supplement neo-republican critique of Berlin's liberalism with a new awareness of structural domination serves a clear current purpose. Far from raking cold historical ashes, by seizing hold of the labor republicanism of the nineteenth century he has lent historical research new purpose in a current conjuncture that demands attention to the past.

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¹ Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History*, 79, 1 (June 1992), 11.

² *Ibid.*, 27-9.

³ Laura Kalman, *The Strange Career of Legal Liberalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 132-246.

⁴ Notably Leon Fink, see for example his *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985); William E. Forbath, see for example his "Ambiguities of Free Labor: Labor and the Law in the Gilded Age," *Wisconsin Law Review* (1985); David Montgomery, *Citizen-Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market During the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia Artisans and the Politics of Class, 1720-1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Sadly my own *Law, Labor, and Ideology in the Early American Republic* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), did not make the cut, which leaves me a choice between disappointment at being ignored, or relief at not being marked as merely one of a rather large crowd.

⁵ Quentin Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 117 (2002), 265.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁷ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Isaiah Berlin *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 158.

⁸ Skinner, "A Third Concept," 256-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 247-61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹¹ On which see Alex Gourevitch, "Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work," *Political Theory*, 41, 4 (2013).

¹² Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975).

¹³ Ira Steward, "Poverty," in Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, *Fourth Annual Report* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1873), 4.

¹⁴In their 1982 Cambridge University Press history of the Knights of Labor in late nineteenth century Ontario, Greg Kealey and Bryan Palmer reveal, despite themselves, something of the same wistful quality of thought in naming their book, on the spine, *Dreaming of What Might Have Been* and on the title page *Dreaming of What Might Be*. Self-identified radical historians trapped in a fracture between the future and one of its pasts.

¹⁵See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Hannah Arendt, editor, *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin, Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 255.

¹⁶*Ibid.*